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SUBJECT: DFM KARASIN ON NATO MAP, BELARUS, GEORGIA,
AZERBAIJAN

Classified By: Ambassador William J. Burns for reasons 1.4 (b,d).

¶1. Summary: In a March 14 meeting with the Ambassador, DFM Karasin went to great lengths to emphasize the "disastrous consequences" of a NATO MAP offer for Georgia and Ukraine in Bucharest, warning (somewhat theatrically) that the U.S. and NATO had to choose between "peace and stability and another Cold War." Karasin also conveyed Russia's concern over U.S. sanctions against Belarusian oil monopoly Belneftekhim, noted the generally positive movement in Russia's bilateral relations with Georgia, and confirmed that Russia's withdrawal of CIS sanctions entailed the "gradual" resumption of cooperation with Abkhazia in all spheres. Karasin stressed that the high level of public interest in the March 13 Duma special hearing on the future status of South Ossetia, Abkhazia, and Transnistria underscored the domestic pressure on the GOR to take strong action in response to the "explosive Kosovo precedent." Karasin also reviewed the status of negotiations on South Ossetia, Abkhazia, Transnistria, and Nagorno-Karabakh. End summary.

NATO MAP for Georgia and Ukraine

¶2. (C) In his March 13 meeting with the Ambassador, DFM Karasin underscored Russia's strong and unwavering opposition to the possibility of a MAP offer for Georgia and even more so for Ukraine at the upcoming NATO Summit in Bucharest. In the case of Ukraine, Karasin stressed that the majority of Ukrainians are against NATO accession, and thus the offer of membership could divide the country "for a long time, if not forever." Asserting that the U.S., as the "deciding voice on the matter," was playing an "extremely dangerous and bad game," Karasin said Russia was hoping that "common sense" would ultimately prevail.

¶3. (C) When asked about Russia's possible reaction to a MAP offer for Georgia or Ukraine, Karasin said he "didn't want to think about such a scenario," but noted that Russia's fundamental concern was not about an offer being made in Bucharest but the idea that an offer would be made at all. He warned that the U.S. and NATO would have to make a choice between "peace and stability in the world and crisis, a new Cold War, and the redividing of the centers of power in the world, including the strengthening of the Muslim world." Ambassador replied that that was a vast overstatement, and noted that NATO would obviously take Russia's concerns into account on this matter, but it would be up to the Alliance itself to respond to MAP requests. Karasin was unmoved, and reiterated the depth of Russian concern.

¶4. (C) Karasin said that both Russia and Ukraine are working "with their sleeves rolled up" to remove the "complicating elements" in the bilateral relationship. Karasin confirmed that the dispute over Ukraine's repayment of its debt for consumed gas has essentially been settled, but stressed that

the strife between Ukrainian President Yushenko and PM Timoshenko makes it difficult to achieve a final agreement on gas supplies. Karasin also noted that Russia remains concerned about Ukraine's attempts to "revise history" on its relations with Russia.

Russia Concerned About Sanctions Against Belarus -----

15. (C) Karasin underscored Russia's concern over the Treasury Department's decision in November 2007 to impose sanctions on Belarusian oil monopoly Belneftekhim. Karasin said Belarus had recently conveyed to Russia its concern that the U.S. decision escalated the level of tension between the U.S. and Belarus, when the Lukashenko regime considered that it had made a number of concessions to satisfy EU and U.S. demands for democratic reform.

16. (C) According to Karasin, the Belarusians had sincerely hoped that the U.S. and international community would welcome the steps, including the release of some political prisoners. Karasin added that on the same day the Belarusian government formally approved the opening of an EU mission in Minsk, the U.S. announced the sanctions on Belneftekhim. Karasin stressed that Russia thought that Belarus had been making a significant effort at reforms, and could not understand why the EU and U.S. seemed to be taking such different views on this issue. He noted that Russia refrained from issuing a public statement on the matter until it received a more thorough explanation from the U.S., and looked forward to discussing it with Acting U/S Fried next week.

17. (C) The Ambassador pointed out that Lukashenko could have taken the opportunity to release opposition prisoner Anatoliy Kozulin on humanitarian grounds when his wife died last

month. The Ambassador also highlighted U.S. concern over Lukashenko's decision to reduce diplomatic engagement with the U.S. by withdrawing their ambassador from the U.S. and insisting that the U.S. Ambassador leave Minsk, and noted that the U.S. expects Minsk will allow the U.S. Ambassador to return to Minsk soon. Karasin agreed that the way in which Belarus reduced its diplomatic engagement with the U.S. was "strange."

Bilateral Relations with Georgia -----

18. (C) Karasin underscored that despite the "bad relations" between Saakashvili and the GOR, bilateral relations with Georgia were generally moving in a positive direction. He noted that air links should be resumed by the end of March/early April, assuming the technical issues were resolved, and restrictions on postal services and visa categories should be lifted in a similar time frame.

19. (C) Karasin reviewed Russia's arguments for withdrawing from the CIS sanctions against Georgia and, contrary to public statements from Georgia, Karasin claimed Russia's decision was not a surprise for Georgia. He said Putin clearly warned Saakashvili that such a move was imminent during their February 21 meeting on the margins of the CIS Summit, and Karasin asserted that there was no reaction from Saakashvili. Karasin stressed that with the removal of the sanctions, the GOR will gradually "relaunch" cooperation with Abkhazia in all areas, including in the economic sphere.

Duma Hearings on Frozen Conflicts -----

110. (C) The Ambassador asked for Karasin's assessment of the March 13 special hearing in the Duma on the future status of Abkhazia, South Ossetia, and Transnistria. The Duma hearing resulted in an initiative to call on the Russian government to ratchet up diplomatic and economic ties with the self-declared republics, including the possibility of opening some kind of diplomatic mission in South Ossetia and Abkhazia, but stopped short of recommending formal GOR

recognition.

¶11. (C) Karasin, who was asked to testify during the hearing, told the Ambassador that the high level of public interest in the hearing -- apparently more than 500 people were in the Duma corridors, trying to get into the hearing -- underscored the domestic pressure on the GOR to take action in response to the "explosive Kosovo precedent." Karasin commented that while he was sitting through the hearing, he had never been surrounded by such raw enthusiasm for bold moves from the GOR, noting that the Duma MPs and other speakers regularly criticized Russian diplomacy for being "too soft and unhelpful." Karasin stressed that the debate over whether Kosovo set a precedent was essentially an intellectual exercise; for "simple people," there was no difference between recognizing Kosovo and other unrecognized territories.

South Ossetia: Time-Out from JCC

¶12. (C) Karasin said that Russia was concerned about Georgia's attempts to change the negotiating format for the

South Ossetian conflict. However, Karasin noted that based on his conversation with MFA Special Envoy for the South Ossetian conflict Yuriy Popov, who was in Tbilisi March 4-7, Georgian Minister for Reintegration Yakobashvili was also not "totally convinced" of the Georgian position that GOG-supported South Ossetian leader Dmitriy Sanakoyev be included in the Joint Control Commission (JCC).

¶13. (C) Popov told us separately on March 11 that the JCC negotiation process remained stalled, with Georgia and South Ossetia unwilling to deal with each other. Popov characterized his recent visit to Tbilisi as "unproductive but not meaningless." He met with OSCE HOM Hakala and twice with Yakobashvili. On the eve of Popov's arrival, Yakobashvili announced the GOG's intention to no longer participate in JCC meetings, while a week earlier South Ossetia's representative to the JCC Boris Chochev declared that he would no longer deal with the GOG's renamed Ministry of Reintegration. Since the JCC is the only official channel of communication between the two parties, the GOR would attempt to "revive" the process, Popov added.

¶14. (C) Popov noted that Yakobashvili "corrected himself" when the two met, offering to join JCC meetings if Sanakoyev was allowed to attend -- a condition that Yakobashvili knew the South Ossetian party would never agree to. Popov

understood through his conversations with Hakala and other Georgian officials that Yakobashvili consulted with none of them before suggesting the "new" condition. Popov termed the current impasse a "time out" which, he suggested, the U.S. and Russia exploit to bring the two partners in conflict back to the negotiating table.

Abkhazia

¶15. (C) The Ambassador emphasized U.S. concern about a possible military build-up in Abkhazia, but acknowledged the MFA's strong denial of any involvement. Karasin noted that Russia would most likely support the UNSC draft resolution being discussed among the Friends of Georgia as long as it did not exacerbate tensions between the parties and maintained the same "tone and logic" in the UNOMIG report.

Transnistria

¶16. (C) In contrast with previous meetings, Karasin was more pessimistic about the prospects for a political settlement on Transnistria in the near future, noting that neither Tiraspol nor Chisinau was ready for serious negotiations. Karasin said he and Russian Security Council Deputy Zubakov relayed these concerns to visiting EU Special Representative for

Moldova on March 11. Karasin acknowledged that plans were moving forward for a 5 2 meeting, and did not dismiss the possibility of a settlement in the near future. but stressed that the "Kosovo precedent has affected the prospects for successful negotiations."

Nagorno-Karabakh

¶17. (C) Karasin expressed concern over Azerbaijan's efforts to move the Nagorno-Karabakh talks out of the Minsk Group and to the UN, stressing that FM Lavrov and he have made this clear to their Azerbaijani counterparts in recent days. He argued that the current negotiating process may have its flaws, but it has facilitated peace and some progress.
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